

A S T R I D S T A L E Y

Foreword by Dr. Ian Grant

A RESCUED LIFE

FROM CULT TO FREEDOM

A Rebuttal of JW's Beliefs



WHAT Constitutes a Cult?

Determining precisely ‘*what*’ a cult is, can differ depending on who you ask. When one starts to look into this question, one realizes that the answer is not as neat as one might like it to be. Cults come in various forms; political cults, religious cults, science-fiction cults, self-betterment cults, psychology cults, environmental life-style cults, and the most we are familiar with and the fastest growing are those with a New Age premise catering to life-style, self-improvement, positive thinking, meditation and accumulation of wealth.¹

Political cults are generally associated with adjectives such as extremist, fringe, white supremacists, or extreme left wing etc ... *Commercial cults* are built upon the *creed of greed*, such as pyramid and multi-level marketing schemes, recruiting people with the promise of making big bucks, as long as they can recruit substantial numbers of others. *Psychotherapy/educational cults* promise enlightenment through pricey workshops and seminars. The more courses one takes the greater the enlightenment promised, and the lighter people’s pockets become, as they part with thousands of dollars in the quest for illumination.

Religious cults are the most readily identified when discussing cults. They are evident amongst Christian, Satanists, New Age, Spiritualist, and Eastern religions.² Most people when asked what or whom they consider a cult are prone to call to mind violent cults like the *Manson Family*³ who made headlines in 1969

for their *Helter Skelter*⁴ ideology, and killing spree. Others remember the *Jonestown Cult* of 1975, led by Jim Jones, in the depths of the Guyanese jungle, who coerced 912 followers into taking their lives in an act of “*revolutionary suicide*,”⁵ drinking cyanide-laced drinks. Then there were the *Branch Davidians* of 1993, with David Koresh at the helm, who fancied himself a prophet,⁶ resulting in 54 adults and 28 children dying in a fire in Texas, 90 miles from Waco. These are the more prominent cults in our thinking marked by their violent outcomes for the people who followed these delusional, charismatic pied pipers. *Violence, isolation and self-destruction, are common denominators of some cults.*

Cult Characteristics: Cults share common characteristics that set them apart. Some of the following are marks of a cult,

*... strict differentiation of leader and follower; rebellion against established authority; paranoia as the new movement seeks to establish itself; simplistic, dualistic thinking ... (good/evil, believer/heretic, saved/damned); and a tendency toward utopian thinking ... differ from religious and many other cult groups in the frequency and violence with which they self-destruct.*⁷

Braden states,

*By the term cult, I mean nothing derogatory to any group so classified. A cult, as I define it, is any religious group, which differs significantly in one or more respects as to beliefs or practice from those religious groups, which are regarded as normative expressions of religion in our total culture.*⁸

Martin adds,

a cult might also be defined as a group of people gathered about a

*specific person or person's misinterpretation of the Bible.*⁹

Additionally, cults will ultimately demand, though not immediately, as the process of change is gradual, conformity in language, dress, demeanor, thinking, behavior, and strict adherence to ideology/beliefs. They will demand a recruit's time, and some are more overt than subtle, in demanding their money and resources. They will cause alienation from family, and social networks, rebellion against establishment, demand loyalty to the group and its mandate, and above all, they will expect recruits to recruit others to enlarge the cult's sphere of influence.¹⁰

A cult will cleverly seek ways to *hide controversial aspects of their past*, will make repeated *end-of-world predictions* causing their devotees to *sell their possessions*, get into debt thinking they don't have to repay loans, leave their employment and shun education. They are a closed system, which rarely welcomes prying eyes in the form of criticism. Cults are *unable to admit mistakes* when end-of-world predictions fail to come to pass, and somehow manage to cleverly *justify* their positions. *Pride and failure to admit mistakes* are a characteristic of a cult and of their adherents, as they give the same rote explanations handed down to them by the hierarchy. Religious cults ALL claim to be on a *mission from god*, and the *only approved vessel* to bring his words to humanity. Of course, *who that god is*, differs with each cult.

Cults are committed to offering *specialized training programs* for their recruits, allowing only for their own printed publications to be utilized in reading Scripture, if a religious cult, and own printed political propaganda, if political, and cult leader(s) are often described as *charismatic*. They demand *100% obedience* to leader(s), any disobedience is labeled *rebellion*, and

unless repented of, are publically shunned, and denounced for fellow members to avoid any further association with them.¹¹

Following years of indoctrination, members become increasingly *phobic* about leaving the cult.¹² People are fed a steady stream of information that they *cannot have a life, success, or salvation outside of the group*. The negative mental images of *god's wrath, family alienation and disaster besetting them*, keep members *fearful and compliant*. Even if the information they receive is illogical to the average person, and unsubstantiated by reality, members are thoroughly convinced life apart from the group will be to their detriment, even if shown otherwise. This will make more sense in the chapter on *Cognitive Dissonance & Cognitive Biases*.

As we can see, the definition is sufficiently broad to prompt us to think of a few movements, if not many, that might fit. Last time I checked, *JW's* do not promote self-destruction or violence outlined in the criterion, so why would we consider them a cult. They do however, subscribe to a good/evil, believer/heretic and saved/damned simplistic, dualistic thinking, which we could accuse other religions of holding the same. One can confidently say that many of the other characteristics of a cult noted above fit them well. What are additional criteria as to how cults operate, which may sway the balance, justifying labeling *JW's* as such?

Specific Criteria

Determining what a cult is rests more in their *power structure, governance and tactics*, not so much on their beliefs. Their

methods make them destructive, and dangerous.¹³ They “*exist on a continuum of degrees of influence, from more to less extreme.*”¹⁴ Some aspects of cult influence on a person are more subtle than others are. People are often blissfully unaware of the changes they are undergoing as changes in personality, lifestyle, and social networks often take place *incrementally*. There is a reason for this; it is termed *thought-reform*.

Thought-Reform: This is based on sequences of process and specific conditions. By way of definition,

*thought reform is a concerted effort to change a person's way of looking at the world, which will change his or her behavior ... it does not consist of only one program – there are many ways and methods to accomplish it.*¹⁵

Key strategies are to

*destabilize a person's sense of self. Get the person to drastically reinterpret his or her worldview and accept a new version of reality and causality. Develop a person's dependence on the organization, and thereby turn the person into a deployable agent of the organization.*¹⁶

We often hear it said that people caught up in cults are *brainwashed*, however, *thought/mind* control, and *brainwashing* according to Hassan are two very different approaches. Brainwashing comes from the Chinese word ‘*hsina - wash brain*,’ and was first coined by Edward Hunter in 1951, to describe how American service men captured in the Korean war, suddenly reversed their allegiances, and values and sincerely believed they had committed fictional war crimes.

Hassan elaborates,

Brainwashing is typically coercive. The person knows at the outset that he is in the hands of an enemy. It begins with a clear demarcation of the respective roles – who is the prisoner and who is the jailer – and the prisoner experiences an absolute minimum of choice ... Mind control also called ‘thought reform,’ is more subtle and sophisticated. Its perpetrators are considered friends or peers, so the person is much less defensive ... The new belief system is internalized into a new identity structure ... On the whole, he responds positively to what is done to him.¹⁷

In discussing *thought-reform*, the exceptional work of Singer and Lalich¹⁸ is synthesized, to explain how cults become so adept at *controlling individuals, and the masses*. Following that, we will evaluate JW’s against this specific *thought-reform* cult criterion.

Conditions Needed for Thought-Reform

Singer proposes the following conditions as needful for *thought-reform* to thrive. Moreover, the degree to which they are present empowers the cult’s ability to enforce restrictions on its members.

Gradualism & Deception: Critical to *thought-reform*’s success is that people remain unaware of the cult’s agenda, the steps of change, and what the ultimate outcome will be for them. *Gradualism and deception are essential to thought-reform*. It is like the proverbial frog in the pot of water. If you throw him into a pot of boiling water, he will jump straight out. However, if you put him into lukewarm water, and slowly heat it up whilst he is in it, he

will find his comfort zone with each increase in temperature, until he dies because of being boiled alive. Similarly, adapting to change through a series of minor incremental steps ensures that *before a person realizes it*, they have lost autonomy, long standing social networks, and dismissed previously held belief systems. Cult leaders, and adherents make all the changes a person experiences and questions seem *normal*, and further reinforce this through “*peer pressure and peer-modeled behavior.*”¹⁹

Controlling a Person’s Time & Social Environment:

Becoming part of their *new family*, spending time with them socially or having them move in, as part of a commune, is an important step in *creating dependency* with this new nucleus of people. The greater the dependency on this new cult family, the easier it will be for the person to walk away from prior social networks and even blood relations with whom they now feel they no longer have anything in common. Any attempt from relatives to voice concerns over this distancing, is met with hostility, further serving to reinforce the notion they hold nothing in common. Now the severing of ties becomes increasingly less of an issue.

Creating a Sense of Powerlessness: This flows on from the previous, in systematically stripping away pre-existing support structures, along with personal autonomy. At the extreme end, this can take the form of handing over possessions, money, leaving jobs or homes thereby making the person entirely dependent on the cult. However, this becomes more evident when *questioning previously held worldviews*, which do not reflect the groups approved worldview. This is called *destabilization*.

Attacks on previously held worldviews cause the person to question their ability to make good judgments and

question their perception of reality. *Relinquishing* them is critical to secure *approval*, despite any inner felt confusion. One *cannot question* the validity of the new worldview as this is deemed *unbelief, rebellion or apostasy*. Two things become eroded here, 1) *critical thinking*, and 2) *confidence in one's ability to make sound decisions*. Reliance on the group for acceptance and the desire for *validation* now override the need to engage *critical thinking*.

System of Rewards & Punishments: There is no greater form of coercion than imposing a *system of rewards and punishments* as a means of eliminating a person's previously held worldview, and curtailing behavior. This stage is about *suppression*. Previously held beliefs, attitudes and activities are *discouraged, suppressed*, and in some instances deemed *demonic*, forcing people to adopt the *good* and *accepted* identity prescribed by the group. Out with the old and in with the new, even if there was nothing wrong with the old. If it does not *comply* with the cult's worldview, *it must go*.

Imposing a *system of rewards and punishments* promotes assimilation of group ideology/belief system, and approved behavior. Now increasingly dependent on the group, there is greater pressure to learn *new information and increase behavior conformity*. *Non-compliance* results in shunning, being marked as a troublemaker, loss of privilege, loss of status, and in extreme cultic practice, physical punishment. It becomes quickly apparent that approval and acceptance hinges on *conformity of thinking and behavior modeled by the group*.

Closed System of Logic & Authoritarian Structure: Finally, they impose a *closed system of logic and authoritarian structure*, thereby disallowing voicing of opinions that run crosswise of the group's ideology. If any fault is to be found it is

attributed to the person and never to the leader(s) or the group. The system is always in the right. Once a person publically espouses and verbalizes the group's ideology that then becomes the measure for evaluating the person's subsequent behavior. The new language when spoken repeatedly creates a separation from the person's previously held beliefs.

Impetus for Attitudinal & Behavioral Change

Milieu Control: Singer goes on to note psychologist Lifton's²⁰ eight themes that provide a fertile ground for attitudinal and behavioral changes in cults. Only the following select few are pursued, due to their relevance. The first is *milieu control*, which centers on *controlling communication*. Gossiping or faultfinding is vehemently discouraged. Any negative talk is considered *dissention*, and not conducive to group unity. Any negative thoughts about ideology or behavior are never to be voiced, and any who observe such voicing are to *report* offenders to the hierarchy. This then introduces us to the *watchers* who report on any who break the rules. Along with this, the group determines what is appropriate reading material, who to associate with, and forbid mixing with apostates, or former members.

Loaded Language: As people increasingly immerse themselves into the group, the pressure to use cult jargon, *loaded language*, becomes imperative. Aside from the positives of gaining approval from the group, the negative result is that speaking cult jargon results in shrinking vocabulary, as vocabulary that does not fit with the new, is eradicated systematically. It then comes to a

point where outsiders are not on the *same page*, or unable to communicate on this now *elevated level* and so associating with them becomes arduous. Before too long, an *us-versus-them* mentality ensues, followed by derogatory labels given to outsiders, thereby widening the chasm. This in turn makes severing relationships with outsiders easier, *creating greater isolation, dependency and camaraderie with the group*. Additionally, it shuts down *critical thinking*, which is the most crucial step to *thought-reform*, and *thought-control*.

All-or-Nothing Belief System: Reinforcing *us-versus-them* mentality is an *all-or-nothing belief system*. Everybody outside the group is wrong, evil, and only those within the group are right, enlightened, and good. There is only *one way* to think, respond, and act, no *in-between*, and all are judged, both those internal, and external, by this *all-or-nothing standard*. Everything is driven or justified by the “*group’s internal moral and ethical code*” whereby “*the end justifies the means*,”²¹ with many considering themselves above the law.²²

The Select: A mindset that we are the *chosen*, *we are the select*, we are the *enlightened*, we are *superior*, permeates cults. This mantra reinforces an *us-versus-them* and *elitist group* mindset. The person is finally part of the *in crowd*, a group that has special calling, and purpose. In fact, the person must now commit himself or herself to recruiting others to this select group, just as they were. Entertaining any thought of leaving is now untenable. To walk away is to join greater humanity who is *nothing*. Any action, any belief that is in the best interests of the group, is justifiable regardless of personal cost. The notion of *self no longer exists*. There

is no longer 'I,' now it is 'we.' *Autonomy and freewill henceforth is only an illusion.*

So in light of the aforementioned criterion, we need to ask the question, are JW's a cult or merely a sect of Christianity? Let us look at what they say on this question, and evaluate it against the criterion. Extensive quotes from their literature are used unapologetically, rather than merely paraphrasing, or synthesizing their work, thereby avoiding any accusation of misrepresenting their beliefs. Minor corrections have been made where spelling errors are evident in quotes, along with some punctuation issues, and abbreviating Scripture references, none of which alter content meaning. The majority of responses are from their online web site, JW.ORG, which hosts selected books and magazines, my personal extensive library of JW resources no longer available through their online library, along with rebuttals from blogs dedicated to their defense and those committed to exposing their web of deception. The Bible referenced throughout is the NKJV unless stated otherwise.

From here on in, there will be a plethora of information presented and it is left to the reader to *engage critical thinking*, to *evaluate and decide* for him or herself, on all that follows.

Is It Correct to Label JW's a Cult?

JW's will insist they are neither a cult nor a Christian sect. In one of their articles, they state in their rebuttal to the accusation they are a *sect* that,

What ... Who ... Why ... How ... of Cults

*some define a sect as a group that has broken away from an established religion. Jehovah's Witnesses have not broken away from some other religious group.*²³

As to their beginnings they state

*the modern-day organization of Jehovah's Witnesses began at the 19th century. At that time, a small group of Bible students who lived near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in the United States, began a systematic analysis of the Bible.*²⁴

As to who their founder is, they write

*among that group of sincere Bible students was a man named Charles Taze Russell. While Russell took the lead in the Bible education work at that time and was the first editor of The Watchtower, he was not the founder of a new religion. The goal of Russell and the other Bible Students, as the group was then known, was to promote the teachings of Jesus Christ and to follow the practices of the first-century Christian congregation. Since Jesus is the Founder of Christianity, we view him as the founder of our organization.*²⁵

With their comments in mind, what follows is a brief overview of their beginning, and evolution over the years taken from various web sites committed to exposing their deception or ½ truths, personal resources, and the writings of Walter Martin's *The Kingdom of the Cults*, a man despised amongst some defenders of JW's. There are those who insist Russell had *Illuminate* or *Freemason* connections.²⁶ However, though compelling, I will avoid this discussion, as documentation is sketchy at best, and difficult to substantiate 100%. Nevertheless, as a *single comment*, if these accusations do carry seeds of truth, then that will shed an *entirely*

different light on the roots of this organization, its influences and development.

As you read the following, *critically evaluate* everything through the *aforementioned discussion* elaborating on *cult criterion*. Information that might be of particular interest is *italicized* and set within ‘apostrophe’ markers or when in *direct italicized indented quotes, underlined*. At times direct quotes will be quite lengthy, this is *intentional* in order to *provide context* to their comments. *Be warned*, it will feel *quite erratic*, and at times *difficult to keep straight precisely* what it is they believe as we track developments in their theology, due to their constantly changing positions on critical issues. *You may find it helpful, and even needful to stop, and reflect between sections.*

**If you would like to purchase the entire book, which
elaborates on the complexity of this topic, and
offers key strategies and rebuttal of their beliefs,
please go to: Lulu Publishing
<http://www.lulu.com/spotlight/staley2atbigpondnetdotau>**

What ... Who ... Why ... How ... of Cults

Endnotes:

- ¹ Singer, M., & Lalich, J., 1995: 13.
- ² Hassan, S., 1990: 39-40.
- ³ Taylor, K., 2004: 29-31.
- ⁴ Bugliosi, V., & Gentry, C., 1994: 283.
- ⁵ Hume K., D., & Getty, *Mass Suicide at Jonestown: 30 Years Later*; Taylor, K., 2004: 31-32.
- ⁶ His original name was Vernon Wayne Howell. *Koresh* is the Persian name of Cyrus the Great, he assumed. Cyrus was considered a messiah for freeing Jews during the Babylonian Captivity. His first name, David, symbolized a lineage directly to the biblical King David, from whom the new Messiah would descend. By taking the name of David Koresh, he was “professing himself to be the spiritual descendant of King David, a Messianic figure carrying out a divinely commissioned errand.” Bromley, D. G., & Silver, E. D., 1995: 54-57.
- ⁷ Taylor, K., 2004: 33.
- ⁸ Braden, C., 1963: xii.
- ⁹ Martin, W., 1997: 17.
- ¹⁰ Lambert, S., 1988: 4.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Hassan, S., 1990: 45-46.
- ¹³ Ibid: 37.
- ¹⁴ Singer, M., & Lalich, J., 1995: 10.
- ¹⁵ Ibid: 62.
- ¹⁶ Ibid: 62.
- ¹⁷ Hassan, S., 1990: 55-56.
- ¹⁸ The following information on this discussion is synthesized from chapter 3 of Singer, & Lalich’s, *Cults in Our Midst - the Hidden Menace in Everyday Lives*.
- ¹⁹ Singer, M., & Lalich, J., 1995: 65; Hassan, S., 1990: 54.
- ²⁰ Lifton, R., *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of Brainwashing in China*. NY: W.W. Norton, 1961.
- ²¹ Singer, M., & Lalich, J., 1995: 71.
- ²² Hassan, S., 1990: 36.
- ²³ “Are Jehovah’s Witnesses an American Sect?” Accessed June 2014.
- ²⁴ “Who Was the Founder of Jehovah’s Witnesses?” Accessed June 2014.
- ²⁵ “Age/Origin/History (of Jehovah’s Witnesses) Who Was Your Founder?” Accessed June 2014.
- ²⁶ Howard, R. “Secrets of The Watchtower Bible and Tract Society.” Accessed June 2014.